



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON - October 12, 2008

Pragmatic Foolishness

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Isaiah 2:1-4

2 The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

² In days to come

*the mountain of the Lord's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.*

*³ Many peoples shall come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths."*

*For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.*

*⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

Luke 6:27-36

²⁷ "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³² "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. ^e Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

^e Other ancient authorities read *despairing of no one*

Everybody is for peace. And yet, peace never comes. As the story goes, a CNN reporter saw an elderly gentlemen praying at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. "How long have you been coming to the Wall and praying?" she asked.

"For about 60 years," he replied.

"60 years! That's amazing! What do you pray for?" she asked.

"I pray for peace between the Christians, Jews and Muslims. I pray for all the hatred to stop and I pray for all our children to grow up in safety and friendship," he replied.

"What a lovely prayer!" she responded. "And how do you feel after praying for 60 years?"

"Like I'm talking to a wall."

Everybody is for peace. God speaks of a day when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." Jesus cries out, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Benjamin Franklin wrote, "I hope . . . that mankind will at length, as they call themselves reasonable creatures, have reason and sense enough to settle their differences without cutting throats; for in my opinion there never was a good war, or a bad peace."

Everybody is for peace. And yet, peace never comes. In 5600 years of recorded human history, there have been 14, 531 wars and only 292 years of peace. [[Canadian Army Journal](#)] And it won't do to just blame the miscalculations of our leaders: even the 12-year-old Anne Frank saw that the problem ran deeper than that. From her garret hiding-place she wrote, "I don't believe that the big men, the politicians and the capitalists alone are guilty of war. Oh no, the little man is just as keen, otherwise the people of the world would have risen in revolt long ago." [[Diary of a Young Girl](#), 1947]

Everybody is for peace. And yet, peace never comes. Have you ever wondered why not?

I think I was given a little glimpse of why peace is so elusive six years ago, during the fall of 2002. It was just a year after the attacks of 9/11. All of us, all of us, were still seized with deep feelings of sorrow, loss, anxiety and anger. The winds of war were blowing, and our politicians were deliberating whether or not we should go to war against Iraq.

Virtually every single Christian denomination came out with positions against the war. Like most pastors, I took to the pulpit the second Sunday of October to do the best I could to articulate Christ's case for peace.

I preached a sermon entitled, "What Would Jesus Do?" I hoped we might transcend the emotions and politics of the season together if we framed the question in terms of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. What would Jesus do?

Many of you will recall that the sermon provoked a distinctly mixed set of reactions. If you weren't here that day, you can pick up a copy of the sermon back in the narthex. But I don't bring the sermon up to re-argue an old issue. Rather, I bring it up to share one of the most thoughtful responses I received.

A parishioner e-mailed me the next week, writing, "I guess you have persuaded me that Jesus would not go to war against Iraq, but you have also persuaded me that Jesus is too impractical for our dangerous times."

That e-mail was such a gift. We long for peace. We know that our God and Christ call for peace. But in the heat of the moment, in the emotions of human conflict, it just seems that peace is impractical, impossible, unimaginable. The Spaniards have blown up the U.S.S. Maine. The Vietnamese have fired shots in the Gulf of Tonkin. Saddam Hussein has weapons of mass destruction. In other times we would be for peace. But not now. Just now, peace is too impractical, too foolish.

Now right from the beginning of Christianity, the Church has had a clear, creedal response to the charge of impracticality, the charge of foolishness. Our Christian faith calls upon us to seek peace no matter

how impractical it might seem to human eyes. After all, there didn't seem to be anything practical in Jesus sacrificing himself on the cross, and there didn't seem to be any pragmatism in the martyrs sacrificing themselves in the Roman Coliseum.

Paul put it this way in First Corinthians: "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." [1 Cor. 1:18.] Notre Dame theologian John Howard Yoder wrote, ". . .The reason for accepting Jesus' way is not that it is not irrational, not that one can make a case for it on other grounds, but that it is one's confession. . . .We confess that the God who has made himself known and has worked out our reconciliation in Christ is a God who loves His enemies, at the cost of His own suffering." [John Howard Yoder, "What Would You Do If . . .?," Journal of Religious Ethics, 2/2 (1974), 81-105.] Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it this way, "To believe the promise of Jesus that his followers shall possess the earth, and at the same time to face our enemies unarmed and defenseless, preferring to incur injustice rather than to do wrong ourselves, is indeed a narrow way." [Dietrich Bonhoeffer, The Cost of Discipleship (New York: Touchstone, 1995) pp.190-91.]

Maybe, as Christians, we're supposed to stop right there. Maybe we're just supposed to say: "God calls upon us to be peacemakers. Christ calls upon us to be peacemakers. We know it seems impractical to seek peace, but we're going to seek peace anyway. We are commanded by our God to do so."

Maybe. But just this morning, just this morning, I want to ask you to think it through with me in a slightly different way. I want to just ask you to consider that maybe sometimes we're not so good at determining the truly practical way forward. Maybe there's something in the way we're put together that limits our ability to discern true pragmatism when we're anxious, or provoked, or attacked.

I mean, I'll bet that every single one of those 14,531 wars in human history seemed to be the only practical way forward to the combatants at the time. But taking the long view, and with the advantage of hindsight, do we really think that every one of those 14,531 wars was practically necessary and turned out pragmatically well for the combatants?

Do you see my point? Maybe we'd be a bit more inclined to follow our Christian mandate for peace if we were a bit more Christianly humble about our ability to assess the practicality of war. And I don't mean "humble" in the sense of affecting a self-effacing manner on the outside. I mean "humble" in the sense of retaining a clear-eyed, hard-nosed recognition of our limitations on the inside: recognizing our human tendency to infect judgment with self-interest, to taint reason with passion, to blind vision with pride – particularly when we have been provoked. Maybe the Divine wisdom in counseling peace has something to do with how poorly we usually choose when we choose to go to war, with how frequently we trigger a series of unintended consequences that, in retrospect, make the seemingly practical course look foolish, and the seemingly foolish course look practical.

As John Howard Yoder argued in his 1974 essay, "What Would You Do If . . .?": "Certainly anyone whose vision of the drama of human conflict is deeper than that of the television western has some awareness of the complexity of historical causality and some notion of how seldom things turn out the way men have predicted especially when what they have been predicting is wholesome fruit to be born by violence." [Yoder, *op.cit.*]

Here's a short story about unintended consequences – a story that asks whether the so called "practical course" didn't turn out to be quite impractical.

In 1982, I read Jonathan Schell's great book, The Fate of the Earth, which outlined the prospects of ecological catastrophe should nuclear proliferation result in a nuclear war. I was an associate in a large Washington, D.C. law firm, chafing for an opportunity to serve the public interest, and the book inspired me to apply for a job with the State Department Legal Adviser's office working on nuclear nonproliferation issues. The interview chain led eventually to a small, dreary interior office staffed by the kind of earnest professional that makes you believe in the nobility of public service.

"Well," he explained, "actually most of my energy is going into trying to slow the erosion of nonproliferation gains we made during the '60s and

'70s. The administration is now pressing to green light the transfer of nuclear technology to Pakistan."

Why was the administration pressing to permit the transfer of nuclear technology to Pakistan? Because we were locked in a cold war conflict with the Soviet Union; and the Soviet Union was bogged down in its invasion of Afghanistan, and because we needed the help of the Pakistanis to funnel arms to the mujahidin fighting the Soviets. If you've seen Charlie Wilson's War, then you know how it all seemed so practically necessary, so shrewdly pragmatic at the time.

But of course we now know how the story ends. The Pakistani scientist A.O. Khan used the nuclear technology we green-lighted to build atomic bombs for Pakistan, and Khan then sold the nuclear technology on the black market where it found its way to North Korea, Libya, and so on, and so on.

Read the web site entry for the State Department's "Office of Nonproliferation and Verification" today and you will see that the office once pressured to turn a blind eye to Pakistani nuclear armament is now recruiting young lawyers who would like to assist in "dismantling the A.O. Khan nuclear black market network." What seemed so practical in 1982 seems so foolish now.

I guess I would like to pray, like the old Jewish gentlemen at the Wailing Wall, that our children will know only peace, that they will beat their swords into plowshares and love their enemies. I would like to pray that they will live in a time when there will no longer be any anxiety, provocations and attacks. And I would like to pray that should there be provocations, then their Christian teaching will slow their rush to conclude that war is the only practical solution.

But I guess we have already seen enough life to know that we must add action to our prayers. We will have to work as hard at establishing a consciousness for peace, as we work to build up the armaments for war. The old cold warrior John Foster Dulles put it this way, "The world will never have lasting peace so long as men reserve for war the finest human qualities. Peace, no less than war, requires idealism and self-sacrifice and a righteous and dynamic faith."

The World War II war hero, President John F. Kennedy put it this way, “War will exist until that distant day when the conscientious objector enjoys the same reputation and prestige that the warrior does today.”

Jesus put it this way, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,” and Paul, “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

In the end, it turns out that this is not starry-eyed idealism but rather the most cold-eyed pragmatism. As Albert Einstein wrote to President Harry S. Truman in 1954, “I know not with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones.”

As President Kennedy said in a 1961 speech to the United Nations General Assembly, “Mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind.” [John F. Kennedy, “Speech to the U.N. General Assembly,” September 25, 1961.]

In the end, it turns out that our Christian commitment to peace is both our obedience to the commands of our God and Savior as well as the only practical way to assure the survival of our species. And just because peace will always seem most “foolish” during times of anxiety, provocation, and attack, we must steadily preach peace in good times and in bad, trusting, as Reinhold Neibuhr wrote, that

“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore, we must be saved by the final favor of love, which is forgiveness.” [The Irony of American History]

Amen.